

# Nicholas of Cusa: Natural Law, Religions, and Peace

## Facing Diversity through Philosophy in Pre-Modern Europe

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, we have seen seemingly never-ending and somewhat antagonistic discussions about the question of if and how different religions can coexist in a peaceful manner. Some scholars, e.g. Regina Schwartz, hold that religions, especially monotheistic ones, are inherently intolerant and even violent towards others: “Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass.”<sup>1</sup> Others like Jan Assmann argue that this also applies to polytheistic religions, though in a different manner.<sup>2</sup> Either way it seems that peace between different religions is a very rare and difficult thing. When Rolf Schieder demands that “without the capacity for critical self-reflection of the religions there will be no peace of religions in pluralistic societies”,<sup>3</sup> the question

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<sup>1</sup> Schwartz 1997, 63.

<sup>2</sup> Assmann (2014, 37) points out that monotheism made a certain form of religious violence possible that polytheism did not, namely “violence in the name of God [Gewalt im Namen Gottes]”.

<sup>3</sup> Schieder 2008, 200: “Ohne die Fähigkeit der Religionen zur kritischen Selbstreflexion kann es unter pluralistischen Verhältnissen keinen Religionsfrieden geben.” My translation.

is how this critical self-reflection could be possible, how it should proceed, and what results it would lead to.

However, as pressing as these questions may be for our times, it is obvious that they were also intensely discussed in earlier periods and amongst these most prominently in the Age of Enlightenment and the High and especially the late Middle Ages. Lessing's poetic Parable of the Three Rings in his play *Nathan the Wise* is one of the most remarkable examples of an engagement with the problem of peace between the religions in the Age of Enlightenment. In the late Middle Ages it is Nicholas of Cusa's (Cusanus') *The Peace of Faith* (*De pace fidei*), written shortly after the Fall of Constantinople (1453), that gives the deepest and most thorough discussion of the problem, the basis, and the shape of a peaceful religious coexistence, focusing not only on the three monotheistic religions Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, but on polytheistic religions, such as Hinduism, as well. Most interestingly, Cusanus' approach, although inspired by his religious zeal, is not a primarily religious (Christian) or theological reflection, but a genuinely philosophical one.

In this paper I will show how Cusanus conceives of the possibility of different religions coexisting in a peaceful way without being forced to give up their diversity altogether. In order to do so, my text has the following structure: First, I will make some general considerations about the topic 'peace of faith' and explore some of the basic problems connected with it. Second, I will turn to Cusanus' *De pace fidei* (*The Peace of Faith*) to systematically reconstruct its basic theses and arguments. Third and finally, I will ask if Cusanus' approach is apt to give an answer to at least some of the fundamental questions mentioned above.

Before I start, let me give some remarks on method. It is not my primary intent in the following pages to give a philologically correct reconstruction of the intentions of Cusanus. What I am more interested in is the question of what logical possibilities Cusanus opens with his approach. This is also the reason why I concentrate on the philosophical side of Cusanus' argument, i.e. the side where revelation does not play the part of an argument inside a chain of conclusions but as an expression of basic human beliefs and – further – needs. In this sense, the following considerations may be 'theological', but not in a specifically Christian way, but more in a Platonic sense where theology does not depend on revelation but can be pursued by reason.

## **2. General Remarks on the Topic 'Peace of Faith'**

The main question connected with the topic 'peace of faith' can be articulated as follows: How can different religions coexist in a peaceful way? This includes two more detailed questions which can be dealt with separately:

- I. What is the relation of different religions towards each other?
- II. What is the relation of religions towards moral principles, especially principles that claim to be universally applicable?

Let us discuss the first question first. There are three traditional ways to describe the relation between different religions towards each other.<sup>4</sup> From an *exclusivist* point of view, each religion *excludes* all the others, and only one of them is true religion, i.e. contains an orientation towards and is thus relevant for salvation. Contrarily, an *inclusivist* holds that there are many religions, each of them with its own right of existence, because each of them can claim to contain some relevant orientation for salvation, but *one religion is superior to the others*. As we shall see, Nicholas of Cusa can also be counted among the inclusivists. The third position is the standpoint of *pluralism*, which claims that there are many religions, each with its own right of existence, because each of them can claim to contain an orientation relevant for salvation *in the same degree* as all the others.

The second question concerning the relation of religions towards moral principles again can be answered in three ways. A voluntaristic position would point out that good and bad depend on men or God's will: good is good and bad is bad because God (or man) wills it, and what God (or man) wants is revealed (e.g. in sacred scriptures in the case of God) and has to be believed or is decided and promulgated in positive laws. A prominent medieval voluntarist is William of Ockham. The counterposition would be an intellectualism: good and bad depend on God's or man's intellect; good is good and bad is bad because God or human reason recognises it, and the way our human intellect recognises it is by means of the Natural Law. In fact, Natural Law is the very structure of fundamental principles for all our practical reasoning, not only inclining us towards doing good and avoiding bad but also enabling us to scrutinize the current situation and then decide what to do. A very prominent intellectualist thinker is St. Thomas Aquinas, but Cusanus also holds this position as we shall see in the following. A third, less well-known conception was held by early modern Jesuit theologian Gabriel Vásquez<sup>5</sup> who argued that good and bad are independent of God and man's will and intellect but are prior to both. The difference of good and bad is not the result of an act of volition, but also not the result of an act of insight. Rather, Vásquez argues that Natural Law is identical with rational nature (*natura*

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<sup>4</sup> For this distinction I rely on Race 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Vásquez or Vázquez (1549-1604), important Jesuit theologian, professor in Rom und Alcalá, rival of Francisco Suárez.

rationalis) itself.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have called this position ‘objectivism’ or ‘objective theorie’ of the Natural Law’.<sup>7</sup>

As I have yet insinuated and as we shall see throughout the paper, I will show that Cusanus’ position can be called an inclusivist intellectualism. In the next section I will give an overview over Cusanus’ philosophical background that works as a basis for his theory of a peace of faith.

### 3. *The Peace of Faith by Cusanus*

#### 3.1. General Philosophical Background of Cusanus’ Thought: God, *ratio*, Intellect, and Learned Ignorance (*docta ignorantia*)

Cusanus (born in 1401 in Kues/Germany, died on the 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1464 at Todi, Umbria) was, probably via Albert the Great, strongly influenced by Neoplatonism, i.e. classical thinkers like Proclus (412-485), Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (around 500 A. D.), and Plotinus (205-270). In being influenced by these thinkers Cusanus would have agreed to the following basic beliefs: First of all, the aim of all human action is beatitude, and beatitude again consists in attaining knowledge of God or ‘the One’. Second: attaining this kind of knowledge means becoming similar to and finally identical with God or ‘the One’ (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ). This ‘becoming-similar-to-God’ can be described as an intellectual movement of return to the origin or principle of all being by means of self-recognition. Third, Cusanus would also agree that there is a certain problem with this intellectual movement of recognising ‘the One’, since ‘the One’ is *per se* unrecognisable. It is beyond all possible cognition since all cognition would *per definitionem* try to acquire a concept of ‘the One’ which then would be just a concept and not ‘the One’ itself (or himself). On the other hand, since we all strive for ‘the One’ as the destination where our beatitude lies, ‘the One’ cannot be absolutely unknowable to us. Otherwise we would not know what to strive for. The solution of this problem lies, as so often, in a differentiation: ‘the One’, says Cusanus, may be unknowable for the understanding (διάνοια; *ratio*; Verstand); however, it is ‘tangible’ by spirit or ‘reason’ or ‘intellect’ (νοῦς; *intelligentia*; Vernunft). Man is in principle capable of understanding, or more accurately: ‘seeing’ God because he is an image of Him (imago Dei); however, as long as he is dependent on *ratio* in order to live his burdensome mortal life he is

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vásquez 1605, disp. 150, cap. 3, n. 22–26 (II, fol. 10f.).

<sup>7</sup> See Ilting 1983, 66.

not capable of seeking the ‘hidden God’ (Deus absconditus) and this beatifying vision cannot take place (DPF I 3).<sup>8</sup>

‘*Ratio*’ is the discursive intellectual potency of the soul. It allows us to examine, scrutinise and recognise being by the help of contrasts and oppositions and by making comparisons. Its deficiency, however, consists in its very method of comparing and contrasting itself, since this method allows *ratio* to grasp things only in relation to others, not as they are in themselves. In contrast to *ratio* as discursive potency, ‘*intelligentia*’ signifies the intuitive power of our soul. *Intelligentia* is prior to *ratio*, since it is related to the unity (unitas) that transcends and constitutes the opposites *ratio* has to work with and thus enables *ratio* to gain a unified recognition. The last and absolute unity that is prior to and the basis for all contrasts and opposites is God as ‘the One’. In God, all the opposites that *ratio* is able to recognise coincide (‘coincidentia oppositorum’). God is absolute infinity (‘infinitas’), absolute unity of all determinations before they unfold as opposites.<sup>9</sup> Thus God, being unity and absolute infinity, is unrecognisable for (finite) human beings whose primary source of knowledge lies in discursive *ratio* that is dependant on opposites in order to recognise something at all. However, rational recognition, though not infinite in the absolute sense, still can achieve a certain ‘infinity’ of her own by indefinitely moving from one premiss to the other and from one conclusion to the next. This is what Hegel would call a ‘finite’ or ‘bad infinity’ and what Descartes meant by differentiating between *infinite* and *indefinite*.<sup>10</sup>

How do these two aspects, viz., God’s unrecognisability as infinity and unity on the one hand, and his constitutive role for human beings for a) achieving beatitude and b) for rational discursive recognition on the other hand, go together? Cusanus’ answer to this lies in the description of a structure he calls ‘learned ignorance (dicta ignorantia)’. According to Cusanus, the intellectual (‘*intelligentia*’) relation of the finite human mind towards God as last aim is connected not only with a factual unrecognisability (‘*ratio*’) of God as the absolute infinity for the finite human mind (*mens*), but also with a knowledge of that unrecognisability: we know that we cannot know God the way that he really is; however, we at least do know that he at the same time is the last principle and last aim of all our knowledge and striving.

This being Cusanus’ basic diagnosis of the human condition, the question is how religion fits into this scheme and how this philosophical theory can contribute to the problem of religious diversity.

<sup>8</sup> DPF stands for *De pace fidei*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Cribratio Alkorani* I, prol. 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> For Hegel cf. Hegel 1812/1986, 149; for Descartes see *Med.* III 38.

### 3.2. Facing Religious Diversity through Philosophy

Let us start our discussions of DPF and the solutions Cusanus tries to develop there by first describing the historical background Cusanus faces with his text and the setting he gives his theory of a peace of faith. The historical situation that led Cusanus to conceive his theory was the siege and conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire between April 2 and May 5, 1453. This event was generally perceived as a cruel bloodshed due to religious differences between Islam and Christianity and as such, a serious threat to Christianity. Cusanus quite vividly gives this fear a voice at the very beginning of his *De pace fidei* where he develops its setting: we read that “[t]here was a certain man who [...] was inflamed with zeal for God as a result of those deeds that were reported to have been perpetrated at Constantinople most recently and most cruelly by the King of the Turks” (DPF I 1). The cause for the cruel deeds at Constantinople is quite clear to Cusanus’ protagonist, who, “with many groanings [...] beseeched the Creator of all, because of His kindness, to restrain the persecution that was raging more fiercely than usual on account of the difference of rite between the religions [ob diversum ritum religionum]” (DPF I 1). It is, thus, the diverse rites that the different religions exercise that in the long run seems to lead to or at least to imply a tendency toward conflict, perhaps even violent conflict.

His passionate quest leads our man after a few days of “prolonged, incessant meditation” to “a vision”: “The few wise men who are rich in the experiential knowledge of all such differences as are observed throughout the world in the [different] religions can find a single, readily-available harmony [concordantia] and through this harmony there can be constituted, by a suitable and true means, perpetual peace within [the domain of] religion” (DPF I 1). In this vision, our narrator is being translated “to an intellectual height where, as it were, in the presence of those who have departed from life a hearing on this matter – [a hearing] in the council of the loftiest beings and under the presiding direction of the Almighty – was being held”; in more detail, our narrator is being transferred to a heavenly congregation of God (the Word), angels, saints, and 17 wise men – 17 men of diverse religions, all being translated to the presence of God in the same way in order to settle their disagreements (DPF I 2).

The main question Cusanus’ protagonist moves in DPF against this background is: how is it that although all humans strive for the same aim, viz., beatitude as vision of God, there is so much difference and, as a result, hatred between the religions? Cusanus’ answer to this is based on the neo-Platonist theory discussed above: God is in principle unrecognisable for the finite human mind (*mens*) and at the same time necessary for man’s eternal happiness. In order to make this paradoxical situation for man bearable, God sent “different seers, called

prophets” who, as God’s “legates, instituted (in Your [i.e. God’s] name) worship and laws and instructed an uneducated people. [Men] accepted these laws just as if You Yourself, the King of kings, had spoken to them face to face; they believed that they heard not kings and prophets but You Yourself in and through kings and prophets” (DPF I 4). Different religions are thus the result of this work of the prophets who were instructed by God to help the uneducated people live a virtuous life; however, people mistook these rules the prophets uttered, taking them not for just relative truths measured for the respective human intellectual grasp, but for the one and only truth itself, since “the earthly human condition has this characteristic: viz., that longstanding custom, which is regarded as having passed over into nature, is defended as the truth. In this way there arise great quarrels when each community prefers its own faith to another [faith]” (DPF I 4).

This ignorance all religions share concerning the true essence of God, as well as the fact that at the same time all religions have the same goal, can for Cusanus, if recognised and acknowledged, work as a basis for a concordance (*concordantia*) between the religions. Concordance is possible because all religions try to achieve a (or even more: the same) vision of God: “For this strife occurs for the sake of You, whom alone all [men] worship in everything they are seen to adore. For no one, in whatever he is seen to desire, desires [anything] except the good, which You are. And in all intellectual inference [*discursus intellectualis*] no one seeks anything other than the truth, which You are. [...] You, then, who are the giver of life and of existence, are the one who is seen to be sought in different ways in different rites, and You are named in different names; for as You are [in Yourself] You remain unknown and ineffable to all” (DPF I 5). Therefore, all religions are based on “*una religio in rituum varietate*” (DPF I 6). This becomes clear when the basis of the different religions is investigated, as we have shown in the previous section.

However, this does not mean that Cusanus suggests that as a result of the uniqueness of the religions’ common goal the difference of religious rites would have to be abolished. Rather, Cusanus sees their pedagogical function in teaching the unlearned people the way to real beatitude in a manner they can understand – even more, since, as we have seen, a true vision of God is impossible for us in this life. That is why Cusanus argues that different rites are to be welcomed. As a matter of fact, Cusanus even pleads that “to seek exact conformity in all respects is rather to disturb the peace” (DPF XIX 67). For example, Indian statues and effigies are allowed inasmuch they “lead to a knowledge of the things which are admissible in the true worship of the one God are not condemned. But when they lead away from the true worshipping of the one God as Sovereign (as if in stones there were some portion of deity and as if [the deity] were bound to a statue), then, rightly, the images ought to be broken, because they deceive [men]

and turn [them] away from the truth” (DPF IV 19). We can conclude that the diversity of the religions has to be accepted, providing no single religion claims to be the ‘una religio’ itself.

### 3.3. The Natural Law as Moral Basis for all Religions

But what is the common basis that allows the believers of different religions to accept this diversity? It is the Natural Law. Natural Law precedes the differences of interpretation concerning what the highest good may be and how it is to be pursued, just as the universal human striving for beatitude does. As we have already insinuated in section 2.1. above, Cusanus here follows the lines of the Thomistic tradition. According to Cusanus, man – here: Adam –, “by the very fact that he was created and had received a rational spirit, he found in that spirit a natural law, i.e., a pathway of justice” (Sermo CCLXXII, 22). This Natural Law that man finds within himself is a set of basic principles of practical reason allowing people to not only pursue the good and beatific but also to reasonably tell good from evil and to decide what to do. On the basis of this law, people hold “that the known God be worshipped. Moreover, this [natural] law shows that good practices differ from bad ones and that good ones are to be chosen – i.e., not to do to another what one does not want done to himself” (ibid.). Aquinas argues that this innate structure is a) our way of participating in God’s Eternal Law, viz., His providence that guides and rules all creation, and that b) we are therefore able to act in providence for ourselves and others, i.e. to give ourselves and others concrete rules for our and their actions.<sup>11</sup> Cusanus takes this up when he says that “this law of rational nature is the pathway of justice and so is the Word of God, or is Christ, who says that He is the Way. For He is the Way of Peace and of Justice. Hence, this law is written in the rational spirit and is the image of the Word of God, even as the law written on a tablet imitates the concept or word of a lawgiver” (ibid.). Finally, Natural Law is not only common to all rational creatures but also universally known, as Cusanus lets St. Paul explain: “The divine commandments are very terse and very well known to everyone and are common to all nations. Indeed, the light that shows us these [commandments] is created together with the rational soul. For God speaks within us, [commanding us] to love Him from whom we receive being and not to do unto another anything except that which we want done unto us. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of God’s law, and all [other] laws are reducible to the law of love” (DPF XVI 59). These commandments of the Natural Law work as a framework within which different

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<sup>11</sup> See Aquinas ST I-II prooem.

moral choices and religious praxes are possible and explicitly allowed; however, both moral actions and religious rites must not transgress this framework. Both are more concrete than the most universal commandments of Natural Law, and both can be considered kinds of positive laws: the positive laws that are established by human deliberation and which rule our societies, and the positive divine laws God has promulgated through the mouths of the prophets and which are expressed within the different religious rites.

Since these positive laws were promulgated in time, they on the one hand serve the specific purpose of giving a concrete human society in a specific historical period a determinate set of rules with regards how to pursue what is best for the members of this community. For the same reason, on the other hand, these positive laws can claim neither the timelessness nor the universal application of the commandments of Natural Law. Since they have been established by deliberation of men or of God they can also be altered or even abolished by new deliberation if they are no longer useful for their genuine purpose, viz., giving concrete directions about how the good is to be pursued.

#### 3.4. Preponderance of Christian Faith

Despite all of these considerations, Cusanus tries to argue for a certain preponderance of Christianity. This might seem surprising at first glance: how, one might ask, can any of the religions have preponderance over any others at all, since all of them seem to share the same fate, viz., being unable to give a real recognition of God? The solution for this problem lies in Cusanus' idea that the happiness which all men seek is "the desire and the hope only for eternal life in their own human nature", and this means that "[t]his happiness is only human life's enjoyment of—i.e., union with—its own Fount, from which flows life itself and [which] is immortal divine life" (DPF XIII 44). According to Cusanus, thus, it is the anthropological aspect of men's striving for happiness that is especially and more than elsewhere fulfilled by Christian religion, since achieving this goal would be impossible "unless in a given [man] the nature common to all [men] were permitted to be elevated unto such a union" (ibid.). This 'given man', who is, of course, Jesus, then can function as a mediator through whom "all [other] men would be able to attain the final goal of their desires" (ibid.). Cusanus concludes that "this [Mediator] is the Way, because He is the man through whom every [other] man has access to God, who is the [final] goal of desires. Hence, Christ is the one who is presupposed by all who hope to attain ultimate happiness" (ibid.). In other words: Christian faith has a certain preponderance or offers a certain advantage over other religions not so much because it would reveal a

higher insight into God's essence but because it is able to answer to human needs and desires concerning beatitude to a higher degree on the basis of the myth of God's incarnation and the resurrection of Christ.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We can summarize that for Cusanus the diversity of religions is due to:

1. the rational unrecognisability of God,
2. the idea that God has expressed himself toward different prophets in different times and in different ways,
3. the fact that most humans are bound to the sensible world (rites etc.) and to custom or consuetude (*consuetudo*),
4. the claim that human beings have to realise their striving for beatitude under the conditions of temporality and history and that they therefore are not only universally pursuing beatitude within the boundaries of the equally universal Natural Law, but that they need concrete instructions regarding how to do so that take their specific historical situation into consideration.

As we have seen, these instructions are revealed in the shape of different religious rites. However, despite of Cusanus' strong focus on and his defence of the diversity of religious rites, he turned out to hold both an intellectualist and an inclusivist position. His theory is to be called a neoplatonic intellectualism since Cusanus argues that a) the basic principles of the natural law are intellectually known by everyone, that b) the natural aim for everyone is knowledge as an intellectual vision of God, and that c) all human beings are somehow, even in this life, intellectually aware of this. It is inclusivist since for Cusanus all religion has a relative right to existence since every religion is referring to the one God. The basis for this theory of a 'single religion' (*una religio*) of which all other concrete historical religions (or 'rites') are just variations or expressions is again to be found in Cusanus' intellectualism. However, we have seen that one religion, viz., Christianity, is superior to the others. According to Cusanus the reason for this lies in the fact that Christianity has a higher capacity than the other religions to symbolise and express what the content of a specifically human beatified life would look like due to the myth of the incarnation of God and the resurrection of Christ. For Cusanus it seems that these Christian myths answer to man's deepest needs and highest aim in a far more accurate way than the other religions. Yet again, this does not mean that Christians would be allowed to force their belief on others, and if they did so in the course of history, they were wrong.

Diversity of religions, therefore can, according to Cusanus, be faced through philosophy, especially neoplatonic thought, which is capable of taking a standpoint different from that of the religions themselves, and at the same time is able to take the aim of the religions seriously. Philosophy can, in Cusanus' opinion, contribute to the project of a peace of faith not by providing a positive insight into God's essence superior to the rites of the religions but by showing and determining the boundaries of all human striving for the transcendent and thereby critically rejecting the absolute claims particular religions tend to put forth. It is obvious that the possibility offered by this philosophical thought has not lost any of its relevance in our days.

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